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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA'S CODEX COMMITTEE ATTEMPTS A COMEBACK

Classified By: Randall Hager, Agricultural Attache,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) may attempt to revive its currently moribund interministerial Codex committee, and recall its former director. Reviving Venezuela's Codex committee will not be easy, because of the very problems that led to its demise a few years ago. The desire to reactivate is apparently due much more to pressure from interested professional food safety and quality researchers and the private food sector than to the government itself. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Venezuela coordinates Codex (Codex Alimentarius) issues through the National Service for Norms, Quality, Testing, and Regulations (SENCAMER, in Spanish), an interministerial body previously staffed mainly by technical experts spread over 18 topical subcommittees. Until about 2006, Venezuela's framework for addressing food safety and quality issues was considered by other international food safety experts as a model in its structure and effectiveness, as it gave voice to all relevant players, including consumer groups.

¶3. (C) Beginning in 2006, political pressure was applied to SENCAMER, cutting it off from critical knowledge sharing activities with the international community. The addition of political appointees to leadership positions resulted in a loss of direction, and scarcely qualified, but politically correct, technicians were added or substituted for staff with significant relevant experience in food safety. COMMENT: We believe that political pressure was applied as a way to eliminate foreign influence on what was thought to be domestic matters by the BRV, and to make SENCAMER more responsive to the government. The BRV does not subscribe to the notion that freer trade based on respected international norms improves food quality and safety. END COMMENT.

¶4. (C) According to Douglas Yanez (strictly protect), formerly (see comment below) of the Ministry of Health and director of the domestic Codex committee, and now a private consultant to the food industry, the politicization of what should be technical offices in the Ministry of Health is so severe that the technical staff are kept isolated, physically and operationally, from decision makers. This results in poorly decided food safety and quality issues, and severely reduces Venezuela's ability to participate effectively in international fora. COMMENT: For the upcoming international Codex meeting, Venezuela will likely be represented by only their Ambassador to the FAO, a non-technical political appointee. We believe that Yanez was only half-joking when he opined that "it would be better that no one from Venezuela attends." Further, Yanez is a real-life example of how the Ministry is being affected by political decision making. Despite being a recognized food safety expert, he was essentially fired by the Minister, though a legal case is ongoing as to his status. END COMMENT.

¶5. (C) According to Yanez, both FAO and the Interamerican Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture support reactivating of SENCAMER's Codex group. We understand from Yanez that preliminary meetings will be held in the near future.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: A reactivation of the Codex working group in Venezuela with Yanez as director would be a very positive step, allowing the country to return to a leading role in

international food safety discussions, build other countries' confidence in doing business with Venezuela, and expand their ability to use accepted principles for trade. Clearly, the benefits that accrue to Venezuela via the application of international standards are much better understood by food safety experts and the private sector agribusiness.

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